

# Self-empowerment - Choosing a mental health professional in California

## Choosing a therapist

Your relationship with your mental health professional is vital to your success. If you use mental health services in California, you should feel comfortable asking some basic questions before choosing a therapist. The Board of Behavioral Sciences (Board) has prepared this booklet to help you make an informed decision.

## Questions to ask your therapist

You may want to interview several candidates before making your choice. Start by giving the therapist or mental health professional a brief description of why you are seeking mental health services. Then, ask him or her for information such as:

- The name of the university or school he or she attended.
- The dates the degree and clinical license were granted.
- If he or she has experience dealing with issues like yours.
- How and when the length of treatment is determined.
- Whether he or she practices from a particular “model” of treatment, and if so, a brief description of that treatment and what it involves.
- If he or she has forensic experience (this question applies only if you need services because of a legal action, such as a child custody dispute).
- If he or she thinks you might need medication from a psychiatrist or other physician working with your therapist and, if so, whether the therapist can make a referral.
- If he or she can accommodate your schedule for therapy appointments.
- What the office policies are regarding cancellations, vacation coverage, and phone calls between sessions.

## Assessment process

The assessment process usually consists of one to three sessions in which you talk with your therapist about your current situation and needs. Your individual and family histories are also discussed at this time. These meetings should give you a good idea of your therapist's style and whether or not he or she is a good match for your personality, clinical needs, and goals. If you are not comfortable with his or her style, you may wish to search for another therapist.

## Treatment plan

At the end of the assessment process, your therapist should give you a working diagnosis and treatment plan. This plan should include a recommendation about the number of sessions and referrals for other services (i.e., referral for medication, testing of a child with learning problems) that you may need to effectively resolve your issues. You and your therapist should work together on your treatment plan. Remember— therapy is a process that requires time and effort from both you and your therapist.

## Mental health professionals in California

There are many different types of licensed mental health professionals. In California, they are regulated by different agencies. It's a good idea to be familiar with all of them so that you can make an informed decision.

Check the license of the mental health professional you choose before your first visit. Here's a list of mental health professionals, the agencies that license them, and their contact information:

Marriage and Family Therapists, Marriage and Family Therapist Interns  
Board of Behavioral Sciences  
t (916) 574-7830 w [www.bbs.ca.gov](http://www.bbs.ca.gov)

Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Associate  
Clinical Social Workers  
Board of Behavioral Sciences  
t (916) 574-7830 w [www.bbs.ca.gov](http://www.bbs.ca.gov)

Licensed Psychologists, Psychological  
Assistants, Registered Psychologists  
Board of Psychology  
t (916) 263-2699 w [www.psychboard.ca.gov](http://www.psychboard.ca.gov)

Psychiatrists  
Medical Board of California  
t (916) 263-2499 w [www.medbd.ca.gov](http://www.medbd.ca.gov)

Psychiatric Technicians  
Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians  
t (916) 263-7800 w [www.bvnpt.ca.gov](http://www.bvnpt.ca.gov)

Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses  
Board of Registered Nursing  
t (916) 322-3350 w [www.rn.ca.gov](http://www.rn.ca.gov)

Licensed Educational Psychologists  
Board of Behavioral Sciences  
t (916) 574-7830 w [www.bbs.ca.gov](http://www.bbs.ca.gov)

## How do I find a therapist in my area?

For a general list of helpful Web sites and referral services, including resources for specialized needs, please visit the "How to Find Services" page in the "Consumers" section of our Web site at [www.bbs.ca.gov](http://www.bbs.ca.gov). If you have health insurance, find out what mental health services (for example, inpatient, outpatient, or substance abuse) your plan covers. Many health insurance plans use some form of managed care, such as an HMO. Call your insurance company, read your "Evidence of Coverage" booklet, or visit your health plan's Web site for more information.

You can still get treatment if you do not have health insurance, or if your insurance does not cover mental health. Community-based mental health programs offer low-cost or sliding scale (income-based) fees. You may have to do some research to find these services, however. Major Internet search engines can help you locate these services in your area. Try entering your "(your city/county) low cost mental health services" in the search window.

## Where else can I get information?

The Department of Managed Health Care, the Department of Insurance, and the Office of the Patient Advocate also can answer questions about your health care plan. Visit them online for more information.

Department of Managed Health Care: [www.dmhca.ca.gov](http://www.dmhca.ca.gov)

Department of Insurance: [www.insurance.ca.gov](http://www.insurance.ca.gov)

Office of the Patient Advocate: [www.opa.ca.gov](http://www.opa.ca.gov)

## Dial 2-1-1

Several counties participate in United Way of America's 2-1-1 referral network for human services. In participating counties, you can dial 2-1-1 from any landline (and most cell carriers) and be connected to someone who can help you find mental health services in your area. The 2-1-1 referral network is constantly expanding to include more counties. Please visit the Web site at [www.211.org](http://www.211.org) for more information.

## About the Board of Behavioral Sciences

We protect you in several ways, including:

- Ensuring high standards of licensees through education, professional experience, and examination requirements;
- Investigating consumer complaints and bringing appropriate action; and
- Giving you access to valuable information and resources.

## Filing a Complaint

We investigate all complaints regarding our licensees and registrants. If you have questions about how to file a complaint, please visit our Web site at [www.bbs.ca.gov](http://www.bbs.ca.gov), or call the Board's Enforcement Unit at (916) 574-7868. Our Consumer Complaint Form and instructions are available in the Forms and Publications section of our Web site. These forms can also be sent to you upon request.

## For more information

Call, write, or visit us online at:

Board of Behavioral Sciences

1625 N. Market Blvd, Suite S-200

Sacramento, CA 95834

(916) 574-7830

[www.bbs.ca.gov](http://www.bbs.ca.gov)

**Disclaimer:** The questions and recommendations contained in this brochure are for the purpose of educating consumers about typical patient experiences with mental health treatment. Every individual's experience with mental health treatment is unique. This brochure offers suggestions only and your specific treatment experience may differ from these descriptions. Differences are to be expected and do not necessarily mean that your provider is not following a responsible treatment course.